

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Heights Theater

OWNERS: Gus and Sharon Kopriva

APPLICANTS: Same

LOCATION: 339 W 19th Street – Houston Heights

AGENDA ITEM: D.2

HPO FILE NO.: 15PL125

DATE ACCEPTED: May-14-2015

HAHC HEARING DATE: May-21-2015

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 33 and 34, Block 90, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a historic theater building constructed of CMU block with a stucco façade.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Heights Theatre at 339 W 19th Street has been an important part of the Houston Heights community since it opened in 1929. Over the years, it has served as a movie house, event space, antique store, and art gallery.

Originally built in 1929 with a Mission-style stucco façade, the exterior was updated in 1935 into the Art Moderne style that it still maintains today. The building was owned and operated as a neighborhood cinema by the Wygant family until 1958, when John Scott purchased the theater and continued to operate it as a neighborhood cinema.

The building was partially destroyed by arson in 1969 and sat as an abandoned shell for a number of years until a full renovation was completed in the late 1980s. The theater reopened in 1989 as a performance venue and art space, and also housed an antiques store for a time. In 1993, the façade renovation was awarded a Good Brick by the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance.

The Heights Theater located at 339 W 19th Street meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8 for Protected Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The following history of Heights Theater is from David Welling's book *Cinema Houston*:

“Now considered one of the city's leading historical districts, Houston Heights was founded during the final decade of the nineteenth century. Located four miles from downtown, the Heights established itself as a separate town before its annexation into Houston. Three decades would pass before the community would have its own movie house.

The original Heights Theatre was, according to available accounts, nothing more than a small storefront space in the Simon Lewis Building, equipped with 350 folding chairs, a screen, and a projector. The building, at the corner of 19th and Ashland Streets, was built around 1922 and would later house Ward's 19th Avenue Drugs, then function as a storage area for Harold's Men's Wear, located across the street. The building was completely renovated in 1989, and now operates as the Carter & Cooley Deli.

The second Heights Theatre was built in 1929, at the beginning of the Great Depression, by Charles Wygant, and was leased to his son Robert, then later to his grandson Richard. The movie house opened on May 14, 1929, with Zane Grey's silent western *Sunset Pass*. The exterior façade resembled that of the Alamo, and the interior was a combination of Spanish Colonial and what might be called "American Ritz." Dark red curtains and wooden seats covered with forest green and ruby-colored leather added to the décor. The front fifteen to eighteen rows of seats were wooden only, designed specifically for children. Total capacity was 750.

Movies at the Heights Theatre – usually second runs and B westerns – ran for a two-day stretch: Sunday-Monday and Tuesday-Wednesday; Thursday was typically a one-day slate. The Friday-Saturday shows were usually westerns.

The ticket price was originally twenty cents, but after the stock-market crash, Robert Wygant collaborated on a price-slashing scheme with Julius Rosenstock, owner of the Heights One-Two, One-Two Cab Company- an arrangement agreed upon at the steps of the theatre. Cab fare was reduced to fifteen cents for the first mile and five cents for each additional mile; movie prices were cut to fifteen cents for adults, five cents for children. Those prices remained intact until the government levied a movie tax that forced prices up to seventeen cents and nine cents respectively. By the fifties, kiddie admission would be a whole twelve cents.

There was no concession stand in the lobby. Instead, ice cream and candies were bought next door at Ebert Armstead's Heights Confectionery.

During the thirties, the theatre played the promotion game whenever possible; a bullet-ridden car might be parked in front of the theatre for a gangster movie, while a caged animal would be on display for a Tarzan flick. Live appearances included ones by Gene Autry and "Iron Eyes" Cody. Said Richard Wygant in a 1989 interview, "I can remember, as a boy, seeing the biggest lions and tigers in my life, out in front in cages."

The theatre's motto, which ran on all the ads, was "Home Owned and Operated by Heights People."

In 1935, the theatre was upgraded with air conditioning, an exterior facelift in an art moderne style, an interior redo of plush Americana, and a seating capacity increased to 900.

Saturday westerns remained a favorite with the neighborhood kids who followed the adventures of Lash LaRue, Tim Holt, Bob Steele, the Durango Kid, and the "King of the Cowboys," Roy Rogers, whose color Republic films stood out in the days when most B films were black and white.

Occasionally, Heights residents would win tickets to the theatre; the *Houston Heights Citizen* newspaper ran the names of the winners, who could call the theatre for their free passes.

In a 1992 *Houston Chronicle* article, writer J. T. Chapin reminisced about his boyhood at the Heights Theatre: "Even with low ticket prices, Mr. Wygant must have made a comfortable living. He owned a big black Cadillac (or was it a Packard?), wore black homburg hats, and smoked huge, foot-long cigars. When he drove up in front of the Heights, usually chauffeured by one of his sons, I regarded him with the same awe I would have accorded Cecil B. DeMille."

When Robert Wygant died, in 1951, his son Richard took over the dwindling business. In January 1957, he shut the theatre down, and subsequently sold some of the auditoriums seats.

The theatre was then bought and renovated in 1958 by John Scott and W.E. Coats, Jr. The missing seats were replaced, a snack bar was added, and excess space was rented to a jeweler who operated a store within the lobby area. The theatre reopened on April 18, 1959, with *April Love*.

Within the first year, Scott ran afoul of the operator's union. The Heights union projectionist earned \$125 for a thirty-five-hour week, and a second, \$90-a-week relief man filled in the remaining hours. Because of financial problems – bank mortgage notes, expenses, and insufficient income – Scott asked the union for permission to operate the relief man's shift. The union's response was a predictable no, so he fired both union operators. The union picketed the theatre – Scott got an injunction against the union.

On October 10, 1959, a man broke three vials in the auditorium, each containing a combination of fatty acids and other chemicals, causing a vomit-like stench that effectively emptied the theatre. Five days later, the same foul stuff was poured into the exterior ticket booth, ruining the ticket machine and money-changer. A similar bombing took place the same day at the Don Gordon Theatre, another nonunion, family-operated movie house.

Scott eventually leased out the theatre, which began showing R- and X-rated flicks. Area residents and civic groups were less than impressed with the subject matter, and the issue climaxed in May 1969.

The theatre booked the controversial Swedish film *I am Curious (Yellow)*. With its brief flashes of nudity and loose approach to sex, *Yellow* was extremely hot, scandalous stuff for its time. It opened in May 21, much to the ire of the neighborhood. On May 24, picketers from the Shady Oaks Full Gospel Church, 1501 West 23rd, claimed that the movie was obscene. The following day, a stink bomb was set off in the theatre and Ku Klux Klan literature was pasted outside. Another stink bomb exploded the next evening, followed by a bomb scare on May 27. The picketers returned on May 31. The cashier's life was threatened on June 1, and the manager's on the day after.

In the morning hours of Friday, June 6, a fire gutted the interior and collapsed the roof. Firemen extinguished the blaze within an hour after a waitress from a nearby coffeehouse reported the fire at 5:15 a.m. Interior damage was valued at \$90,000.

The fire appeared to be deliberately set. Apparently, the arsonist hid between the seats at closing time, then walked up the attic boards on either side of the projection room, saturating it with kerosene. An empty can of kerosene was found in the rear of the theatre. No one was ever arrested.

According to a person quoted in a newspaper interview, the theatre was “probably burned in the name of decency by some misguided moralist.” Others surmised that the blaze had been set by unionized film operators in retaliation for the theatre's nonunion status. Scott's hope to rebuild the theatre never occurred, since the property was underinsured.

From 1969 to 1981 the theatre remained an abandoned shell, housing an occasional drifter from the cold. Scott ran a machine shop out of the front of the building. It was then sold in 1981 to John Holland, who planned to restore the old movie house.

Holland's elaborate renovation ideas included a deli and a dining room in the lobby, a small screening room and a balcony on the second level, and on the third, a garden and a patio. Also on the second level would be a private club and bar (an interesting concept considering that the Heights had been a dry area since 1918). The estimated cost for the project was \$500,000 over a three-year period. Holland secured a \$150,000 bank loan, got another \$150,000 in guarantees from personal investors, commissioned engineering reports, and had plans drawn up by architect Robert Morris.

Holland's eventual improvements included an interior stage as well as exterior frames for glass blocks and circular windows, but his grand plan was never completed, and the theatre remained roofless until 1988. It was, however, used on occasion, as when it hosted a benefit concert for Pacifica radio station KPFT in April 1982. The event included a showing of the 1956 movie *Rock Around the Clock*, with Bill Haley and His Comets, and a live musical lineup featuring Doctor Rockit, the Mydolls, Really Red, the Haskells, and others.

In February 1988 the theatre was sold to Heights residents Gus and Sharon Kopriva, a local engineer and artist, respectively, who planned to reopen it as an art gallery and performance space. The theatre was Gus's fortieth-birthday present (instead of a stereotypical sports car). Having grown up watching movies at the old theatre, he did not want to see it demolished, as had happened to so many other Houston movie houses.

In 1988, West 19th Street became one of the first two urban demonstration targets of the Texas Historical Commission's Main Street Program, in which the conservation and reuse of historic buildings was intended to lead to economic revitalization of the community. The Kopriva theatre renovation quickly became a focal point in this project. The Koprivas used the Morris-Holland façade design for the construction and brought in contractor Jay Dougherty, who had previously worked on the Bellaire Theatre restoration. They found that the second-floor projection area had survived the fire, as had the two restrooms. Air conditioning and heating were installed, the façade was repaired, the neon marquee was restored, and the long-awaited roof was finally added.

The theatre was reopened on Friday, November 3, 1989, with a live production by Dreem Katz, *Pigs Dance II: Romp Thru Hell*. Playwright Kenny Joe Spivey and his theatrical troupe had already achieved local notoriety at Main Street Theatre with *Every Day at Dawn*, *the Pigs Dance in Ancient Ritual*, *I Know*, *I Dance With Them*. Their Heights performances took place in an unadorned auditorium of exposed bare walls, temporary theatre seats, folding chairs, and sofas. Dreem Katz would continue to use the venue for their shows even after Spivey's death in 1993.

Live productions by the Urban Theater and other groups, fashion shows, photography exhibits, a lecture by Dominican priest Matthew Fox, and a gala for the Greater Houston ACLU have all occurred at the revamped theatre.

In January 1993, the Koprivas, Morris, and Dougherty received the Good Brick Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance for their restoration of the theatre. Their work also

allowed the building to be removed from the Texas Historical Commission's biannual Endangered Historical Texas Properties list.

The second theatrical wind of the Heights theatre eventually passed, and the building became a retail antiques center."

The most recent use of the theater has been as an event space and art gallery.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND ALTERATION HISTORY

The theater was built in 1929 with a Mission-style façade that was remodeled into an Art Moderne style in 1935. Originally seating 750, the structure was expanded to 900 seats in the 1935 remodel. Air conditioning was also added at this time.

The building was partially destroyed by fire in the 1969 arson, although the façade and neon sign remained largely intact. The building sat vacant until purchased in 1982 by Jim Holland, Jr., who began a façade restoration under the architect Robert Morris. The theater was purchased by Gus and Sharon Kopriva in 1988 and renovated to its current design, using Morris' 1982 plans, still in keeping with the Art Moderne style but now including the glass block and circular windows.

The building is a two-story stucco Art Moderne theatre constructed of CMU block. The theater features Art Moderne elements of a smooth stucco façade with rounded corners and minimal ornamentation. The theater is part of a contiguous block of historic commercial buildings to the west and sits next to a vacant lot on the east.

The front façade, south elevation facing W 19th Street features a full width metal canopy supported by five square metal post topped by the 1935 neon marquee. The marquee consists of a central parapeted text board under a stacked curvature neon sign reading "Heights." The façade features a three bay parapet roof line. The central bay features three curved vertical bands; the two exterior bands feature neon arrow detailing.

The first floor of the south elevation features two stepped glass block windows located on the east and west corners of the façade and two vertically oriented glass block windows on either side of the central entrance. The theater's central entrance consists of two sets of double doors with a glass block transom. Each door features a semi-circle single lite; when closed creating the appearance of single circular lite.

The second floor features two plate glass circular windows on the east and west sides of the elevation and two central semi-circle plate glass windows; one on either side of the neon sign.

The east wall facing the vacant lot is constructed of CMU block with no fenestrations. The elevation features a painted mural.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bush, David, and Parsons, Jim. *Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast*. Bright Sky Press, 2008.

Welling, David. *Cinema Houston: From Nickelodeon to Megaplex*, University of Texas Press, 2007.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by the Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION

The HAHC shall review each application for designation of a protected landmark that is included in an application for designation of a landmark at the same time and in the same manner as it reviews and considers the application for a landmark. The HAHC and the Planning Commission, in making recommendations with respect to a protected landmark designation, and the City Council, in making a designation, shall consider whether the building, structure, site, or area meets at least three of the criteria in Section 33-224, or one of the criteria in Section 33-229, as follows:

S	NA		S - satisfies	NA - not applicable
Meets at least three of the following (Sec. 33-224(a)(1):				
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b).		

OR

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The property was constructed before 1905 (Sec. 33-229(a)(2);
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OR

- ☐ ☒ The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3);

OR

- ☐ ☒ The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the Heights Theater at 339 W 19th Street.

HAHC RECOMMENDATION

The Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the Heights Theater at 339 W 19th Street.

EXHIBIT A
CURRENT PHOTOS
HEIGHTS THEATER
339 W 19TH STREET



Photo by David Bush, www.houstondeco.org.

EXHIBIT A
CURRENT PHOTOS
HEIGHTS THEATER
339 W 19TH STREET



EXHIBIT B
HISTORIC PHOTOS
HEIGHTS THEATER
339 W 19TH STREET

ORIGINAL 1929 MISSION-STYLE FACADE



EXHIBIT C
SITE MAP
HEIGHTS THEATER
339 W 19TH STREET

